DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 262 412 CS 209 275

AUTHOR Ray, Karen J.; And Others
TITLE New Methods, Old Theories, and Teacher Education: Some Observations of Writing in a Third Grade Classroom.
PUB DATE [85]
NOTE 17p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Change Agents; *Educational Change; Educational Theories; Grade 3; Inservice Teacher Education; Primary Education; *Teacher Improvement; Writing Improvement; *Writing Instruction; Writing Processes; *Writing Research

ABSTRACT

An observational study was conducted of a third grade teacher as she changed her classroom practices to reflect the changes in her theory of writing instruction which were prompted by a graduate course. One of the three researchers was primarily responsible for observing the class on a regular basis during the scheduled writing time. A second researcher provided classroom demonstrations and also helped with analyzing the data and interpreting what was going on in the classroom, while the third researcher served as a sounding board for the other two researchers. At the conclusion of the study, the researchers realized that the teacher had not implemented changes in her theory of writing instruction. She had found it hard to give up control of topic selection, publishing decisions, and discussions among students during peer revision. As teacher educators, the researchers knew there could be no change in the classroom unless there were a real change in the teacher's theory. Their experience forced the researchers to ask themselves how much they knew about the process whereby an individual teacher abandons a theory and adopts either a modification of the original or an entirely new theory. Kuhn's analysis of scientific revolution may be helpful: if an individual abandoning one theory in favor of another may be seen as a microcosm of paradigm shifts taking place across an entire scientific field, and his work may well lead others in fruitful directions. (DF)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED262412

NEW METHODS, OLD THEORIES, AND TEACHER EDUCATION:

SOME OBSERVATIONS OF WRITING IN A THIRD GRADE CLASSROOM

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Karen J. Ray

Sharon C. Lee

John C. Stansell

Texas A&M University

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Karen J. Ray
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS209275

New Methods, Old Theories, and Teacher Education:

Some Observations of writing in a Third Grade Classroom

"I know it worked for Donald Graves, but can it work for me?" This is the question raised by a third grade teacher who was worried about the writing instruction in her classroom. She was having trouble seeing connections between what she had learned about process writing in a graduate class in language arts instruction and what was actually going on in her classroom. She was concerned that her students were not gaining the full benefit from process writing instruction, and this concern was causing her enough grief and aggravation that she sought us out to help her observe the writing instruction taking place in her classroom and help her change. It seemed obvious to us as we agreed to help her in this endeavor that she was interested in much more than a casual study of her classroom. We decided that we had a teacher on our hands who truly wanted to make changes: she had a real desire to alter classroom practices to reflect those changes in theory prompted by her graduate course. It was a perfect

opportunity to see and study a teacher growing and developing in knowledge and practice.

Plan of the Study

In order to help this teacher bring her instruction more in line with what we perceived to be her emerging theory of writing instruction, we formulated a research plan that would maximize our efforts as observers. One researcher in our study was primarily responsible for observing the class on a regular basis during scheduled writing time. She observed the teacher, the students, and the transactions between them as they wrote together and learned about the writing process. Field notes included comments from the teacher and students, attitudes conveyed through the responses of students, and the general atmosphere of the class as the students all worked with their writing.

This primary researcher spent the largest amount of time with the students and the teacher, using peer debriefing as a form of triangulation (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). A second researcher helped with analyzing data and interpreting what was going on in the classroom. Discussions between these two researchers were organized as debriefing sessions where all the observed transactions of the classroom were scrutinized in light of the basic tenets of process writing. The evaluation and analysis that was taking place as the study progressed was helpful in identifying categories for data collection and areas for further study. This kind of collaborative research enabled us to constantly monitor our perceptions and analysis as we observed and evaluated the classroom instruction of the teacher.

This second researcher also had a special role in the classroom along

with her role as researcher. After visiting the classroom on her own and engaging in several discussions with the primary researcher, she formulated a plan for demonstrations with the students. The demonstrations she prepared were intended to illustrate, first of all to the teacher and secondly to the students, some specific implications of process writing for the stories being written in class. An important aspect of these lessons was that they actually emerged from analysis of the data that was being gathered in the classroom, and were designed to meet the observed needs of the teacher and the students. Because needs were real rather than contrived, the demonstrations were received in an open manner by both teacher and students.

The third researcher involved in this project served as a sounding board for the other two researchers. His primary responsibilities were to help identify gaps and inconsistencies in the observations and to suggest new directions for both research and instruction.

The credibility of the findings was established through regular consultation among the three researchers and discussions with the teacher. Frequent checks were made to insure that the perceptions of the researchers were in line with the perceptions of the teacher.

Examining our Assumptions

When the semester was over, the data was all collected and the students and teacher began their summer activities. All three researchers then sat down to try to make sense of the data. Our first inclination was to sit back and admire our efforts as researchers and change agents. The teacher had tried new methods and techniques, and the students had produced improved writing samples. We had accomplished our goals -- or had we?

One of the original goals of the study was to help the teacher bring her classroom methods in line with her new theory of writing. We based much of our study on the assumption that she had made a commitment to the theory of process writing instruction and simply needed our help to implement it in the classroom. We at first admired her eagerness to bring her classroom practices in line with her new theory. Later, however, we noted that although she wanted new methods and strategies for her classroom, her attitude was a bit skeptical as she watched our demonstrations. The attitude was almost one of "prove to me that these methods work and then maybe I'll buy into your theory." Finally we had to admit that she was evaluating new methods in terms of her original, unaltered theory.

The Role of Theory

For all of us, a theory of the world in our head (Smith, 1982) guides us in making decisions. Everything we say and do is based on a theory of the world that guides thoughts and actions. We may not be able to articulate the theory or even be aware that it exists, but it is there nonetheless. We have reasons for the way we act and we act in ways that make sense to us.

The theory of the world in our head idea applies as well to decisions language arts teachers make on a daily basis regarding instruction and methodology. Teachers are not out making curricular decisions based on whim and fancy, but evaluating classroom evidence in terms of their theoretical orientation and then acting accordingly (DeFord, 1972, 1981, 1985). In this sense, teachers become action researchers in their own classrooms as they gather data in order to make decisions and implement change (Wiseman, Lee, & Patterson, 1985). But when teachers are not in touch with

their theoretical orientations, the "new approaches" they implement in the classroom are likely to be only superficially new. As Moss (1981) put it, "Teachers may, in fact, include myriad new techniques without ever altering their underlying theoretical orientation at all." Without conscious intent, she was aligning the "new methods" of process writing with her implicit, product-centered theory and thus making no substantial instructional changes.

Initial Observations

As observers in her classroom, we noticed that the room was always orderly -- everything had its place and stayed put. The teacher's thirteen students occupied desks that were arranged in three straight rows. Student writing was posted around the room on bulletin boards and neatly arranged on walls. As writing time began each Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 1:00, the students quietly took out paper and a pencil in anticipation of the writing assignment for the day. The writing activities that the teacher chose for her class were structured around teacher-initiated topics. Students were either asked to write about one topic or one picture. When the research project began, the teacher had just started a long-term writing activity called "Writing Carrells." Thirteen file folders, each containing one picture, were distributed to the students each day. The students had one class period to write about each picture. While the students worked quietly on their stories, the teacher walked around the room helping individual students. The "Writing Carrells" were passed to different students each day until all the students had written a story about each picture. These stories were then bound into separate books about the individual pictures. Each student had a writing folder that was

a holding place for stories until they were published.

When asked to write, all of the students took their time and thoughtfully prepared a story. The students had developed the attitude that they were authors who could produce good stories. The teacher nurtured this positive attitude toward writing by encouraging her students to write, making herself available for individual conferences, and writing with the students to show that she valued writing.

Assertive discipline techniques helped her to maintain control and reinforce correct spelling and punctuation. During writing time, she would make statements such as, "I like the way most of us are learning to indent," and "I like the way you are writing neatly so I can read it." These statements showed that she valued "indenting" and "writing neatly," and she wanted these behaviors to continue. Her students also gave evidence of valuing conventional spelling and punctuation. When she would ask the class what they should be correcting on their papers, the students always mentioned spelling and punctuation first. Students never mentioned changing the content of the story; she had to constantly remind them of this. Her focus on the perfectability of the product (Harste & Burke, 1978) and her control of students' focus through assertive discipline effectively precluded attention to content.

She also did not demonstrate to her students any difference between editing and revising; all changes that a student made in his story were viewed as "editing." She instructed her students to "Edit your papers to make sure they're interesting, and check your punctuation and spelling." She was asking her students to simultaneously revise the content of their stories ("make sure they're interesting") and edit for conventionality

("check your punctuation and spelling"). Since students used pencils, she encouraged them to erase minor errors so that after corrections had been made on their first drafts, they could be published as final copies. There was no distinction between a draft to be revised and a final copy to be published.

New Methods, Old Theory

Several weeks into the research project, the three researchers and the teacher decided to have a meeting. The goal of this meeting was to confirm the impressions being gathered and formulate some concrete suggestions to aid the teacher in implementing what the researchers perceived to be her new theory of writing. During the discussion, two of the researchers expressed their impression that the students definitely seemed to view themselves as writers. The teacher confirmed this opinion and expressed the concern that while her students exhibited no anxiety over the writing assignment, they were becoming overly worried about correct spelling and punctuation. Since we could see her instructional behavior as the cause of this worry, we suggested that she help students see a difference between revising and editing a story. Once her students were aware that revising content and editing mechanics were two different concerns, she could encourage her students to revise first, thus minimizing their initial concern for conventional spelling and punctuation. By stressing revision, we hoped that students would be able to get more of their ideas on paper and be able to expand and rearrange these ideas before turning to editorial concerns as that last step before publication.

The teacher's obsession with publishing every story her students wrote also led us to think that she might not fully understand the fine points of

process writing theory. In discussing these points with her, we suggested that she allow her students to choose which story they would like to publish, thus shifting control of the publishing process from the teacher to the author, where it belonged. This would show the students that not all writing should be published: writers do not always produce "publishable" work, and some stories are better than others.

In order to help the students see the difference between editing and revising, one researcher offered to come into class and demonstrate the revision process. The teacher welcomed the researcher and agreed to extend the demonstration by giving a similar one to her class later.

The researcher brought in her own original story that had been written on a large sheet of paper. She used this sheet of paper to illustrate that all writers can use help to revise their stories. Emphasizing the difference between editing and revising, she pointed out that editing involved checking for conventional spelling and punctuation, while revising was the process of expanding or changing the content of the story and its structure. After reading her story to the students, the researcher encouraged the students to ask her questions about things they did not understand in the story. Some of the questions they asked were: "Why did that happen in your story?" "Who was there?" "That part doesn't really belong in this story, does it?" These questions showed that the students were able and willing to get past simple proofreading to deal with making the story more interesting and readable. She told the class that their questions gave her some good ideas for making her paper better, but reminded them that she was the only one who could decide whether or not to use the suggestions since she was the author. The point she emphasized was that anyone can edit a

story, but only the author can revise her story. When asked why the author was the only one who could revise her story, one student answered, "Because no one else knows about everything that happened to you."

After this initial encounter with revising, the teacher decided that she could do this kind of lesson with the students as well. She chose a story that she had written and copied it on the chalkboard for students to see. As we observed her lesson, we began to see more evidence that she did not fully understand or agree with the ideas so basic to process writing.

As an example, here are some of the questions the teacher posed to the students during their revising time:

> I want to clear this up for the reader. Is there a way I can make that into one sentence? It sounds a little choppy -- what's a question that comes to your mind? What else, though? Does the question WHEN come to your mind? Maybe I can clear it up that way. AH-H-H -- that's what I wanted. That's better!

This series of questions was intended to guide the students to discover the changes that the teacher wanted to make. She did not give up control of the situation or trust the students to ask appropriate questions. She did not believe that the students could help her revise.

She knew that revising would be a new concept for her students, so after this lesson, she let her students define "revising." Thereafter for her students, revising involved "adding things, subtracting things, and mixing things up in a story." This definition was operational for the students, and they often quoted the definition to remind others that correct spelling and punctuation were part of editing. When the teacher tried to correct a punctuation error during revising, several students sang out, "THAT'S EDITING!"

The teacher continued to stress that anyone could edit spelling and punctuation, but only the author could revise the content of the story. The students were in full control of the content of their stories -- others could make suggestions for revision, but the author could accept or reject the suggestion. Giving the students this much control over their writing was a big step for her because previously she had maintained tight control over content revision. Content revision had been done only in individual conferences between the teacher and the student, and all of the teacher's suggestions were taken and used to "correct" the students' stories. Now she was beginning to give students more "ownership" of their stories --the author made the final decision, not the teacher. But the trust she should have been showing was not evident.

After demonstrating revision to her class, she began to use assertive discipline to positively reinforce revision. She would make statements such as, "I like the way some of you are naming your characters -- that makes the story more interesting," and "I like the way Whitney is reading over her story before turning it in."

She continued to give her students more control over their own stories by using the writing folders in a different way. Instead of the writing foders being merely a pre-publication "holding place" for all finished papers, the writing folder became a "revising place." Students began to keep drafts of stories in their writing folders, and they were able to choose the ones they wanted to publish. Since not all were published <u>en masse</u> as before, there were always stories to work on in the folder.

At this point in the research, we really thought the teacher was working hard to implement her new theory. We had no reason to suspect that

she was merely trying a new set of methods with the old theory still set firmly in place. She had changed many things in her classroom and her students had more control of revising and publishing. In another meeting with all three of us, she expressed her appreciation to the one researcher for coming into her classroom to demonstrate revision. She felt that the students had really learned the difference between editing and revising. We confirmed her feelings through sharing our observations. She also felt that her students were beginning to write more and better content. We agreed and suggested that rather than assigning topics, she let the students try writing on topics they chose. This would allow the students to write about topics that were personal to them and about which they had something to say. Also, the students' feeling of ownership of their stories would increase.

We also suggested that students be given the opportunity to try peer revision, and offered to come into the classroom and each take a group to lead through the peer revision process. She reluctantly agreed to let us come to her classroom, saying "If you think it will work, then I'll give it a try." As we sensed her reluctance to go further in implementing what we perceived as her new theory, we began to suspect that perhaps she was just trying methods rather than putting into place a new theory.

As she prepared for peer revision with her students, she decided to let her students begin keeping lists of future topics on which to write. She did spend some time in whole-class and individual discussions to get the students' topics sufficiently narrowed down, and the students were able to think of their own topic and write a story about it.

When we arrived to help her with peer revision, her students had three

or four stories in their folders. Some stories had already been revised, but others needed revision. She organized her students into four groups of three of four students each and they quietly moved their desks into position. The teacher and each of us took one group to lead in peer revision. Some members of each group offered good suggestions for revision to others in the group. Although many suggestions were given, each student retained ownership of his/her story and chose whether to accept the suggestion or not. A few of the students had some problems because the activity was not as controlled as activities the teacher usually gave the class. Since most members of the groups were able to use peer revision successfully, however, we were confident that with more practice all of the students would benefit from peer revision.

The teacher's perception of her students' experience with peer revision, however, was rather different. In subsequent discussions with us about the experience, she led us to reconsider some of our earlier observations in a new light.

Rather than seeing the successful aspects of the experience as we had, she focused upon the problems that some students did have in the groups as a result of the freedom they were given to offer questions and suggestions to other authors, and to accept or dismiss questions and suggestions about their own work. In short, she felt that peer revision did not work. Her one comment was that it might have worked "if there had been four of me" -- if, in other words, she had personally led each group and carefully controlled each member's responses as we had seen her do before in whole-group lessons.

Examining our Teacher Education Assumptions

We realized then that she had not really implemented changes where they counted -- in her theory of writing instruction. All along, she had found it hard to give up control, first of topic selection and publishing decisions, and now of discussions among authors during peer revision. We had seen her reluctance to act on the belief that young writers could and would find their own topics and take responsibility for revision. We had noticed that in her follow-up demonstration of the revision process, the students had to remind her that editing comes later. And finally we understood that the theory we thought she had discarded was very much intact and still governing her teaching; in spite of all the "new things" she had done, she was still inviting her students to see writing in the same way she had before.

In a sense, we should not have been surprised to discover this. As teacher educators, we know that unless there is a real change in the teacher's theory, there is no real change in the classroom. Yet, we also know that theories can change in response to coursework and other professional experiences (Stansell, Moss, & Robeck, 1982). And so we were surprised, because we had been caught in our own tacit assumption that exposure to a theory is tantamount to acceptance of that theory, especially if the exposure is gained in the context of a graduate course when a knowledgeable professor can adroitly elicit and skillfully address the questions and doubts of students.

In the final analysis, our experience forces us to ask ourselves and the profession how much we really know about the process whereby an individual teacher abandons a theory and adopts either a modification of the

original or an entirely new theory. For ourselves, we must answer that we do not know as much as we would like. At present, we would only suggest, as a framework for examination of this process, Kuhn's (1970) analysis of scientific revolutions. If an individual abandoning one theory in favor of another may be seen as a microcosm of paradigm shifts taking place across an entire scientific field, his work may well lead us in fruitful directions.

REFERENCES

DeFord, D. E. (1978). A validation study of an instrument to determine a teacher's theoretical orientation to reading instruction. (Doctoral dissertation, Indiana University, 1978).

DeFord, D. E. (1981). Literacy: Reading, writing, and other essentials. Language Arts, 58, 6, 652-658.

DeFord, D. E. (1985). Validating the construct of theoretical orientation in reading instruction. Reading Research Quarterly, 20, 3, 351-367.

Harste, J. C. & Burke, C. L. (1978). Toward a socio-psycholinguistic model of reading comprehension. Viewpoints in Teaching in Learning, 54, 3, 9-34.

Kuhn, T. S. (1970). The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, (2nd Ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Moss, R. K. (1981). Classroom analysis of teachers' theoretical oreintation to reading. Louisiana Reading Teacher, 4, 2, 13-22.

Smith, F. (1982). Understanding reading. (3rd Ed.). New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Stansell, J. C., Moss, R. K., & Robeck, C. P. (1982). The development of theoretical orientation to reading among preservice teachers: Effects of a professional training program. In Niles, J. A. & Harris, L. A. (Eds.), New Inquiries in Reading Research and Instruction, Thirty-first Yearbook of the National Reading Conference. New York: National Reading Conference.

Wiseman, D., Lee, S., & Patterson, L. (1985). Action research: How teachers learn from their classrooms. Manuscript submitted for publication.